

The Wayward Reformers: Peter Martyr Vermigli and Jan Laski

Among the many shining stars of those God raised up as leaders in the Reformation are a couple of gifted but wayward divines; who had an impact upon the Reformation, but a minimal influence upon their homelands. Peter Martyr Vermigli had to flee the Roman Inquisition in Italy, which wiped out the few Reformed groups who gathered there. Jan Laski (or John A'Lasco) seems to have wandered from Reformer to Reformer, but did not begin to minister to his native Poland until just a couple of years before his death.

The Life and Times of Peter Martyr Vermigli

In the mid-sixteenth century, Italian Catholic theologians did not usually receive a warm welcome into the Protestant communion. What is more, we are not accustomed to tracing the origins of Reformed theology to Padua, Naples, and Lucca. But then, few scholars have reckoned with Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562), one of the leading lights from that constellation of theologians who gave formative shape to early Reformed theology. He embodied a rare combination in sixteenth-century Europe - an Italian Roman Catholic theologian who became one of the leading Protestant Reformers of his day. No other theologian of the sixteenth century stood out so prominently in both camps. In his capacity as a Protestant, Vermigli's sphere of influence extended to some of the major centers of the reformation movement: Bucer's Strasburg, Archbishop Cranmer's Oxford (where he was Regius Professor of Divinity from 1547-1553), and Bullinger's Zurich. Indeed, his importance was such that one Protestant contemporary, Joseph Justus Scaliger, could say, "the two most excellent theologians of our times are John Calvin and Peter Martyr." Besides Calvin and a few others, Vermigli has now been recognized as one of the "codifiers" of Reformed theology.

Pietro Martire Vermigli was born in Florence on 8 September 1499. Little is known of his early years except that he had an abiding affection for the Bible. Reflecting back on his youth in his inaugural speech at Zurich in 1556, Vermigli revealed: "For even from my youth, when I yet lived in Italy, this one thing I minded to follow above all arts and ordinances of men: even chiefly to learn and teach the holy scriptures, neither had I other success than I purposed." Following this conviction, even though it went against the wishes of his father, Vermigli joined the Lateran Congregation of Canons Regular of St. Augustine in 1514. Academically precocious, the young Florentine was sent to study at the University of Padua, at that time one of the most famous universities in the world. At Padua he lived a dual intellectual existence. On the one hand, he was inundated with Aristotle in the faculty of theology at the University; but on the other hand, he imbibed Renaissance humanism at his monastery, S. Giovanni di Verdara. His years of study at Padua culminated in priestly ordination and a doctorate in theology (1526). During the Italian phase of his career he was well known as a distinguished



theologian, eloquent preacher and a moral reformer. He was the confidante of powerful Prelates under Pope Paul III, probable consultant to the Consilium de emendanda ecclesia of 1537, and was appointed by the reformist cardinal, Gaspero Contarini, to the first delegation to seek reconciliation with the Protestants at the Colloquy of Worms in 1540.

Vermigli's theological transformation was initiated during his Neapolitan abbacy (1537-1540) by the Spanish reformist, Juan de Valdes. It was in the Valdesian circle in Naples that Vermigli encountered the Italian reform movement, first read Protestant reformers Martin Bucer and Ulrich Zwingli, and embraced the pivotal doctrine of justification by faith alone. Evidence of his theological reorientation manifested itself during his Priorate in Lucca where, according to Philip McNair, he established "the first and last reformed theological college in pre-Tridentine Italy." However, the Papal Bull Licet ab initio of July 1542 changed everything. The Roman Inquisition was reinstated under the iron hand of Cardinal Carafa, and Vermigli fled north across the Alps to nascent Protestantism.

Almost immediately after his apostasy in the summer of 1542, he was catapulted into prominence as a biblical scholar and reformed theologian. He was resident theologian in Strasburg and Zurich, but his nearly six years in England were among the most fruitful of his career. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer appointed Vermigli Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University (1547-1553). He single handedly upheld Protestant eucharistic teaching at the famous Oxford Disputation of 1549, consulted with Bishop Hooper in controversy in 1550, assisted Cranmer in the revision of the 1552 Prayer Book, participated in the formulation of the Forty-Two Articles of Religion in 1553, and played a pivotal role in writing the ecclesiastical laws of England, the so-called *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum* from 1551-1553. Vermigli's name would no doubt have been better remembered today if his sojourn in England had not been cut short by Mary Tudor's ascension to the throne in 1553. Urged by Cranmer to flee quickly, Peter Martyr fled to Strasburg which would become a center of the resistance efforts by English Protestant exiles. Although widely acknowledged as one of the leading theologians of his day, Vermigli fell into virtual obscurity until rediscovered by doctoral students at British universities nearly thirty years ago.

The Wanderings of Jan Łaski of Poland

Jan Łaski (John Alasco) born 1498, came out of one of the most illustrious families in Poland. (His Uncle, the Primate in Poland was also named John Łaski, was noted for his opposition to Luther's followers.) Destined for the Church, the young Polish nobleman received the best education which the schools of his native land could bestow, and then visited Germany, France, Italy, and Belgium in order to enlarge his studies. At the University of Louvain, finding the air murky with scholasticism, he turned to Zurich, where Ulrich Zwingli urged him to "Search the Scriptures." At Basel, he met Erasmus. Erasmus was charmed with the grace and genius of Łaski who lived about a year (1525) under his roof. Friendships formed at Basle with Farel, Oecolampadius, and Pellicanus who initiated him into the study of the Hebrew Scriptures. His uncle, the primate, hearing that his nephew had fallen into "bad company," recalled him by urgent letters to Poland, and demanded that he should purge himself by oath from the suspicions of heresy, which he did in 1526. But with his ecclesiastical duties as a Archdeacon in Warsae and as a Hungarian diplomat he came into close contact with the corruptions of the Papacy, and the need of a radical reform of the Church. He resumed his Bible reading and renewed his correspondence with the Reformers. Two mitres — that of Wesprim in Hungary, and that of Cujavia in Poland — were offered to him. But, frankly and boldly avowing his convictions, he declined them, and left Poland in 1536, uncertain of where to go. In 1537, he met Melancthon in Leipzig. He married in 1539.

The Countess Regent of East Friesland, Anna, urged him to come and assuming the superintendence of the churches of that province. After long deliberation he went, but the task was a difficult one, the country was a sectarian battleground. All things were in confusion: the churches were full of images, and many of the nobles were dissolute in life, but he persisted. Accusations were carried to the court at Brussels against him, and soon there came an imperial order to expel "the fire-brand" from Friesland. " But supported by the Countess, Łaski went on steadily in his work. Gradually over six years, the remnants of Romanism were weeded out: images disappeared; and the order and discipline of the Church were reformed on the Genevan model; preparing an asylum for the Protestants of the Netherlands during the evil days that were about to come upon them and paving the way for the appearance of William of Orange.

But it also brought the hostility of the Lutherans. Łaski resigned to minister to a single congregation in Emden, the capital of the country. Then Archbishop Cranmer, invited him to take part, along with other distinguished Continental Reformers, in the Reformation of the Church of England. Traversing Brabant and Flanders in disguise, he arrived in London in September 1548 for a six months' residence with Cranmer, where they became close friends of like mind concerning the Reformation of the Church. After a short visit to Friesland, in 1549, he returned to England, and was nominated by Edward VI. in 1550, Superintendent of the German, French, and Italian congregations erected in London, numbering between 3,000 and 4,000 persons, and which Cranmer hoped would yet prove a seed of Reformation in the countries from which persecution had driven them, But the death of Edward VI and the

accession of Mary suddenly changed the whole aspect of affairs in England. The Friesian Reformer and his congregation embarked at Gravesend on the 15th of September 1553, in the presence of thousands of English Protestants, who crowded the banks of the Thames, and on bended knees supplicated the blessing and protection of Heaven on the wanderers.

Setting sail, their little fleet was scattered by a storm, and John's ship entered the Danish harbor of Elsinore. Christian III of Denmark, a mild and pious prince, received Łaski and his fellow-exiles at first with kindness; but soon their asylum was invaded by Lutheran intolerance. The theologians of the court, Westphal and Bugenhagen, poisoned the king's mind against the exiles, and they were compelled to put back to stormy seas. This shameful breach of hospitality was repeated at Lubeck, Hamburg, and Rostock kindling indignation of the Churches of Switzerland, and drawing from Calvin an eloquent letter to Łaski, in which he gave vent not only to his deep sympathy, and his astonishment "that the barbarity of a Christian people should exceed even the sea in savageness." Finally, Gustavus Vasa, the reforming monarch of Sweden, extended a cordial welcome to them, but Łaski instead tried first Friesland, then Frankfort-on-the-Maine, where he established a Church for the Protestant refugees from Belgium. During his stay at Frankfort, he sought to heal the breach between the Lutheran and the Calvinistic branches of the Reformation. But his efforts although seconded by the Senate of Frankfort and several German princes, were in vain.

In 1555 he dedicated to Sigismund Augustus of Poland a new edition of an account he had formerly published of the foreign Churches in London of which he had acted as superintendent. Urging on the king the necessity of a Reformation of the Church of Poland. It is probable that it was this publication that led to his recall to Poland, in 1556, by the king and nobles. Łaski was appointed superintendent of all the Reformed Churches of Little Poland, presiding over the Churches of more than half the kingdom. He held Synods. He actively assisted in the translation of the first Protestant Bible in Poland. His final goal was the erection of a national Church, Reformed in doctrine on the basis of the Word of God, and constituted in government as similarly to the Churches over which he had presided in London. But with the opposition of the Roman hierarchy; the growth of anti-Trinitarian doctrines, first broached in the secret society of Cracow; and the vacillation of King Sigismund Augustus, the National Synod he envisioned never came about. The king hesitated then refused to convoke the Synod leaving the work unfinished. In January 1560, Jan Łaski died, and was buried with great pomp in the Church of Pintzov. After him there arose in Poland no Reformer of like adaptability and power, nor did the nation ever again enjoy so favorable an opportunity of planting its liberties on a stable foundation by completing its Reformation.

